



Rosa Luxemburg

## The Mass Strike

[“The Mass Strike”](#) (a downloadable compilation of it is linked below) is a 1906 [Rosa Luxemburg](#) classic, with a message that is similar to Lenin’s 1902 [“What is to be Done?”](#)

Rosa Luxemburg, in the third paragraph of her Chapter 1, demolishes the anarchist, syndicalist, workerist, “economist” approach to the Mass Strike thus:

*“either the proletariat as a whole are not yet in possession of the powerful organisation and financial resources required, in which case they cannot carry through the general strike; or they are already sufficiently well*

*organised, in which case they do not need the general strike.”*

This does not mean that the Mass Strike, or general strike, is ruled out always and forever as a tactic; but only that the Mass Strike tactic must arise necessarily and organically from the circumstances, as Rosa Luxemburg goes on to explain. In particular, it means that the mass strike as “holy month”, designed to starve the bourgeoisie into submission, is bound to fail.

But then it may come to pass that instead of over-eager anarcho-syndicalists with no subjective or objective basis, the trade unions may be dominated by over-cautious reformists. Rosa Luxemburg records that the German trade union movement was approaching a two million membership, (roughly the same as COSATU in South Africa today), but it was reluctant to move.

Rosa Luxemburg describes the 1906 problematic of Germany thus:

*“The German labour movement... assumes the peculiar form of a double pyramid whose base and body consist of one solid mass but whose apexes are wide apart... To desire the unity of these through the union of the party executive and the general commission is to desire to build a bridge at the very spot where the distance is greater and the crossing more difficult. Not above, amongst the heads of the leading directing organisations and in their federative alliance, but*

*below, amongst the organised proletarian masses, lies the guarantee of the real unity of the labour movement.”* [last page of “The Mass Strike” compilation, linked below].

This argument supports the SACP tactic of developing Voting District Branches, so that the “*real unity*” of the South African National Democratic Revolutionary Alliance can be structurally put into effect “*below*” – at local level – between the local structures of its constituent parts: ANC, SACP, COSATU and SANCO.

The relationship of the party and the class, or in Luxemburg’s particular terms “*the social democracy*” and “*the trade-unions*”, opens up in Chapter 6 of The Mass Strike to a vision of a revolutionary *ensemble* that must necessarily go far beyond the structures of its previously-organised components, which are bound to be a minority of the whole. Luxemburg writes:

*“The plan of undertaking mass strikes as a serious political class action with organised workers only is absolutely hopeless. If the mass strike, or rather, mass strikes, and the mass struggle are to be successful they must become a real people’s movement, that is, the widest sections of the proletariat must be drawn into the fight... Here **the organisation does not supply the troops of the struggle, but the struggle, in an ever growing degree, supplies recruits for the organisation.***

*“... it is not permissible to visualise the class movement of the proletariat as a movement of the organised minority.*

*“...the sections which are today unorganised and backward will, in the struggle, prove themselves the most radical, the most impetuous element, and not one that will have to be dragged along...”*

***“If we now leave the pedantic scheme of demonstrative mass strikes artificially brought about by order of parties and trade unions, and turn to the living picture of a peoples’ movement arising with elementary energy, from the culmination of class antagonisms and the political situation—a movement which passes, politically as well as economically, into mass struggles and mass strikes—it becomes obvious that the task of social democracy does not consist in the technical preparation and direction of mass strikes, but, first and foremost, in the political leadership of the whole movement.”***

Luxemburg is saying that the political structure must lead. The trade union movement cannot lead the revolution. Please read Chapter 6 of The Mass Strike, linked below, and especially the concluding words.

Try [this link](#) if you wish to access a linked list of further works by Rosa Luxemburg, on [MIA](#).

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [The Mass Strike, 1906, Rosa Luxemburg](#).
- To download any of the CU courses in PDF files [please click here](#).